

Effective Marketing and Recruitment in Special Needs Adoption
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Abstract:

This study looked at the various marketing tools utilized by the Special Needs Adoption Program in the state of Kentucky. By using a web-based anonymous survey, we had the ability to capture the perception of effectiveness regarding recruitment of adoptive/fostercare parents and the effectiveness of various marketing tools in protecting the rights and privacy of potential adoptees. The study population consisted of 146 adoption/fostercare workers and team supervisors across the state of Kentucky which have a front line view of the success of each marketing tool used.

Introduction:

In the United States there are approximately 520,000 children in the foster care system with 117,000 of those children eligible for adoption (Adoption Media, n.d.b.). In the state of Kentucky there are currently a total of 6551 children in the foster care system, with 1883 of those children available for adoption. In Fayette County alone there are currently 507 children in the foster care system with 183 hoping for adoptive homes (Cabinet for Health and Family Services-TWIST, 2004). With this number of children in the foster care system waiting and willing to be adopted, the need for adoptive parents is impressive.

The number of children waiting for adoption increases yearly. The U.S. Department for Health and Human Services reports that the United States had a total of 110,000 children in 1998 waiting to be adopted which increased to 126,000 in 2001, and that 290,000 new children entered the foster care system during the year of 2001 (USDHHS, 2003) . With increasing numbers, effective recruitment efforts to promote and acquire additional adoptive parents are essential both to meet the needs of children and also to fulfill federal mandates. On November 19, 1997, President Clinton signed into law the Adoption and Safe Families Act (P.L.105- 89)

mandating states to make reasonable efforts to place children for adoption. The law also requires that if a child is in foster care for 15 out of the most recent 22 months, a petition to terminate parental rights (TPR) must be filed with the courts. While petitioning for TPR the state must also concurrently identify, recruit, process and approve a qualified adoptive family on behalf of the child regardless of age. Implementation of the Adoption and Safe Families Act has freed many children for adoption who previously lingered in the foster care system due to parental rights not being terminated (Children's Bureau, 2004).

According to Triseliotis (2002), multiple studies have concluded that children left in foster care, as compared to those adopted, were less able to form relationships, less able to carry out successful parenting roles, had obtained less education and were far more likely to be unemployed and to draw disability. Long term foster children were also more likely to be homeless, drug addicted, criminals, and/or to experience domestic violence or be a perpetrator of domestic violence. Studies have concluded that children raised in foster care have 2-3 times more adjustment difficulties in adult life than children adopted (Triseliotis, 2002). Findings indicate that foster children continuously experience a high level of anxiety, sense of difference, and a feeling of "belonging to no one". Research consistently concludes that foster children who have been adopted have significant outcome advantages compared to those who were not adopted (Triseliotis, 2002).

Kentucky has established a specific program to address the adoptive needs of those children that are deemed to have "special needs". SNAP (Special Needs Adoption Program) was established in 1979 to facilitate permanency and adoptive placements for children where parental rights have been terminated. Children referred to SNAP have a physical, mental, emotional, learning and/or behavior

disorder, are over the age of 11, are minority children, and/or are part of a sibling group therefore they are more difficult to place in adoptive homes and are deemed special needs (Cabinet for Health and Family Services, 2004). Research indicates that 45-50% of those children in foster care have a chronic health problem or a diagnosed physical disability and that as many as 95% have an emotional or behavioral disturbance (American Humane Association, 2000).

The Special Needs Adoption Program is responsible for the promotion of adoption and recruitment of adoptive parents for the children referred to them by state cabinet workers. The program uses a variety of marketing techniques to accomplish its goal of recruiting adoptive parents and placing children into adoptive homes. This research will focus on the four main types of marketing: Herald Leader/Louisville Courier Journal Advertisements, Public Service Announcements, the Annual SNAP Picnic and the SNAP Website.

An average of 4 children per month is featured in TV or print. The children's pictures are presented to the public in printed material and/or PSAs along with generalized data regarding the child. Contact information for the local SNAP offices is provided so that any interested prospective adoptive parent may call and inquire about the child featured or other children ready for adoption. The PSAs "spot light" an adoptable child each week or they feature local celebrities who encourage adoption. Public Service Announcements are broadcast on television via local television stations. The SNAP picnic is held annually. All prospective adoptive parents and adoptable children are urged to participate. The purpose of the picnic is to expose potential adoptees to the types of children available for adoption. The SNAP website is maintained through the SNAP office and is updated as information becomes available. It contains pictures of each child who is ready for adoption along

with basic information about the child (Cabinet for Health and Family Services, 2004).

The SNAP program processed a total of 1403 inquiries via email, internet, phone, face to face, or letter from January 2004 thru July 2004. Out of the total children waiting for adoptive homes, 25 children were placed during that time period (United States Department of Health and Human Services 2004).

With such a demand, effective recruiting for adoptive parents is an ongoing difficult process. Each child has an adoption worker assigned to them via the Cabinet for Health and Family Services. The adoption worker is responsible for referring special needs children to the SNAP program and monitoring the adoption process. The front line adoption workers are in the best position to witness the success of various marketing tools used by SNAP. The research question is: *Which marketing tools utilized by SNAP (the annual SNAP Picnic, the Heard Leader/Louisville Courier Journal advertisements, the SNAP Website, or PSAs) do adoption workers across the state of Kentucky perceive as most effective for Kentucky's children waiting to be adopted? Do they think that the marketing tools utilized by SNAP are effective in protecting the rights and privacy of potential adoptees?*

Literature Review:

Overall views of adoption are positive yet we lack enough adoptive homes to adequately care for children waiting in the foster care system to be adopted. In 1997, Princeton Survey Research Associates conducted a national random phone survey for The Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute which examined the attitudes of those living in the United States toward adoption. According to the data collected,

persons living in the United States view adoption as a worthy endeavor. Sixty percent of those persons had personal experiences with adoption in some form or another such as being adopted themselves, adopting a child, knowing an adoptee, or putting a child of their own up for adoption. According to a public opinion poll conducted by Tyebjee (2003) in collaboration with the Community Task Force on Homes for Children those who have adopted claim that motivation and rewards for adopting are diverse. They report rewards from wanting to make a difference in a child's life, adding meaning to the lives of adoptive parents, providing a positive family experience to wanting to become a parent due to infertility or lack of partner or continue parenting. A rather large portion, 81.5 million (36%), of Americans have at one time or another considered adoption, yet a large number of children in the foster care system are waiting to be adopted according to the National Adoption Attitudes Survey which used focus groups and telephone interviews to explore how the public views adoption (Dave Thomas Foundation, 2002).

Adoptive homes for minorities are especially important. A consistent finding in available adoption literature is that more research and training is needed especially in the recruitment of minority families willing to adopt. Moffatt and Thoburn (2001) conducted research with a sample of 254 children drawn from a cohort of 1165 British children placed between 1980 and 1985. That research suggest that adoptive parents can successfully parent children from races different than their own (i.e. effectively conceiving pride in appearance, heritage, and culture within the adopted child). However they acknowledged that additional tasks will have to occur in an already difficult situation for the adoptive parents to be successful. They concluded that it is in the best interest of a minority child to be placed with parents of his/her own race if possible (Moffatt & Thoburn, 2001). Horner (2000) conducted an analysis

of adoption research and reports which stated that African American children raised in Caucasian homes can develop a “good sense of racial identity but black children adopted by black couples had a stronger racial identity” (p. 3). Numerous articles speak of the need to be culturally competent in recruiting minorities to become adoptive parents. Suggestions include improvement in response to inquiries of prospective minority adoptive parents, recruitment materials in various languages, and recruitment within minority communities and/or churches. The articles also speak of increasing public awareness of the high percentage of minority children needing adoptive homes especially within minority cultures. They also state that policies which encourage and allow homosexuals the right to adopt are needed to increase the availability of minority homes for children (Bausch & Serpe, 1999, Fenton, 2001, Brooks & Goldberg, 2001, Haymes & Simon, 2003).

Adoption agencies whether private or public, are typically aware of the overwhelming need for families willing to adopt and give some effort to recruitment of those families. The issue seems to lie in how to most effectively recruit an adequate number of adoptive families for the multitude of children waiting to be adopted. The most difficult area of adoption is recruiting permanent homes for special needs children, those who have emotional, behavioral, or physical conditions, are part of a minority population and/or are members of a sibling group (Ferguson, 2004). Various forms of aggressive marketing tools have been utilized in the hopes of attracting adoptive families such as printed materials, televised public service announcements, community events, websites, books which hold pictures and information regarding children and/or a community canvas where materials are distributed. Websites have proven to be effective, at times raising adoption rates as much as 30 per cent. Governments which adequately fund public adoption agencies find that the adoption

rates increase dramatically as in the British Columbian provinces of Alberta and New Brunswick which had a rise of 198 per cent (Ferguson, 2004).

There is data concerning the needs of foster children and the improved wellbeing of children whom are adopted. Unfortunately, little research currently exists which studies the most effective method of marketing and recruitment for achieving permanent adoptive placements or the effectiveness of methods currently being used in protecting the rights and privacy of potential adoptees.

Methods:

Study Design: The research study consisted of a survey of adoption/foster care workers in Kentucky. The participant population was recruited using a purposive convenience sampling method. All prospective participants were recruited by virtue of the position they hold with the Cabinet for Health and Family Services. All identifiable prospective participants were given the same opportunity to participate.

Study Population: The study population consisted of 146 adoption and/or adoption/foster care workers and supervisors for the Cabinet for Health and Family Services. A list of email addresses for the prospective participants was procured through the Eastern Kentucky University Training Resource Center (EKU TRC) to inform them of the purpose of the research and to invite them to participate in the project. Emails for adoption workers and team supervisors are compiled through the EKU TRC and permission was requested to utilize email addresses for the research project. No minor children or high-risk populations were included in the research.

Informed Consent: A web-based survey was utilized for the research project and contained a link to the web site where the survey could be completed and submitted anonymously. The survey included an introductory portion, which stated that submission of the survey included implied consent. The message also informed

prospective participants of the following: (1) that the study is anonymous; (2) that no identifying information will be attached to their completed survey; and (3) that in publication all references to the data will be in aggregated form. The message also informed the participants of the purpose of the research and contact information for the Principal Investigator and the University of Kentucky Office of Research Integrity (UK ORI) staff.

Data Collection: Data collected was returned to a secure server for download by the Principal Investigator. The survey instrument was created and tested for face validity by the Principal Investigator. Survey included the following data for collection: employment position, length of employment, geographical region of employment, ethnicity, gender, ranking of effectiveness of recruiting methods both as a group and individually, rank of recruiting methods in protecting rights/privacy of adoptees both as a group and individually, and an option for comments. (See Appendix A). Variables measured within the survey received random assignment as to their ordering.

Data Analysis: The data collected from the survey has been compared to the Training Records Information System (TRIS) data collected by the Eastern Kentucky University Training Resource Center for which permission to utilize was procured. Upon completion of the data collection, the Principal Investigator conducted qualitative and quantitative analysis of the data collected. All report of collected data is in aggregate form.

Potential Risks: This research presented no more than minimal risk. The likelihood and extent of risk associated with this research was no more than that encountered in daily life or in the completion of professional tasks and other job-related duties. As with any electronic transfer of information security issues arise. Any such security

concerns were nullified by the fact that the survey was anonymous with no identifying variables reported. All report of the data generated from the research is in aggregate form. All data collected was collected and stored in an electronic database located in a local computer under password protection.

Data Analysis:

The survey was sent to 146 individuals who work for the state of Kentucky either as a foster/adoption worker, an adoption worker, or a supervisor. The survey return rate was 45.89% (67). The following tables/figures (T1 through T5) show the demographic data regarding the participants in the research survey.

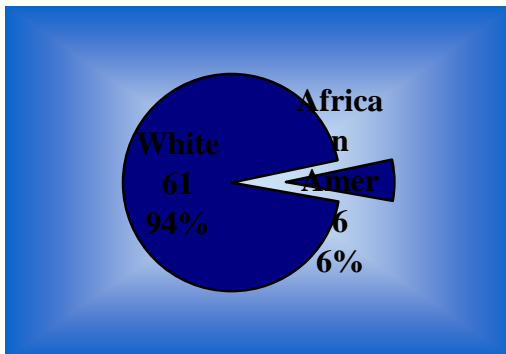
T1 - What position do you hold?

86.6%	58	Foster and adoption worker
7.5%	5	Adoption worker only
6.0%	4	Supervisor

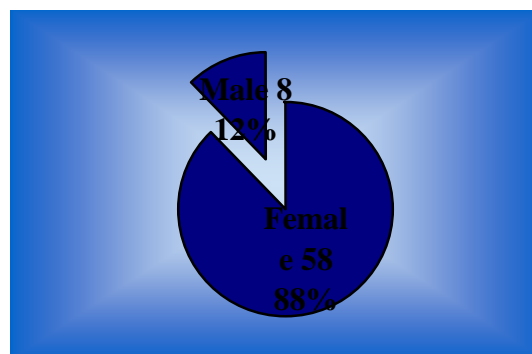
T2 - How long have you worked as an adoption worker?

26.9%	18	3-4 years
20.9%	14	5-6 years
19.4%	13	More than 9 years
17.9%	12	1-2 years
0.4%	7	7-8 years
4.5%	3	Less than 1 year

3 - Ethnicity



T4 - Gender

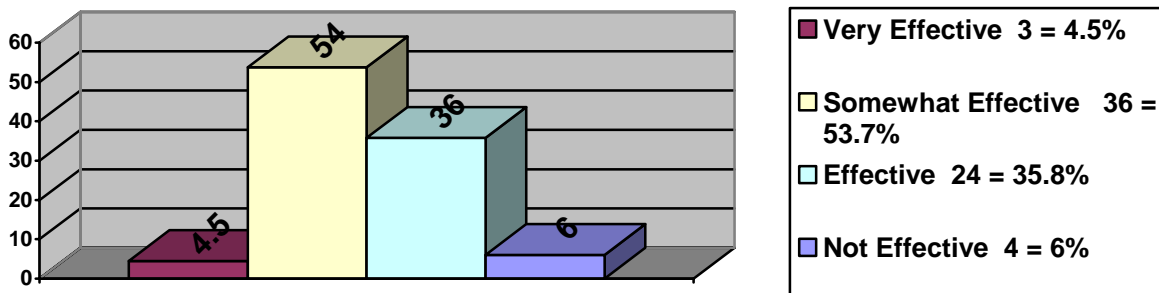


T5 - What region do you work in?

17.9%	12	Northern Kentucky
13.4%	9	KIPDA Jefferson
11.9%	8	Bluegrass Rural
6.0%	4	Barren River
6.0%	4	Cumberland Valley
6.0%	4	Gateway/Buffalo Trace
6.0%	4	Pennyrile
4.5%	3	Bluegrass Fayette
4.5%	3	Green River
4.5%	3	KIPDA Rural
4.5%	3	Lake Cumberland
4.5%	3	Purchase
3.0%	2	Big Sandy
3.0%	2	Kentucky River
3.0%	2	Lincoln Trail
1.5%	1	FIVCO

As shown in the above tables/pie charts, the survey was completed generally by Caucasian female foster/adoption workers. Of the respondents, 26.9% (18) have worked in their position for 3-4 years. The majority of the respondents (17.9%) work in the Northern Kentucky region.

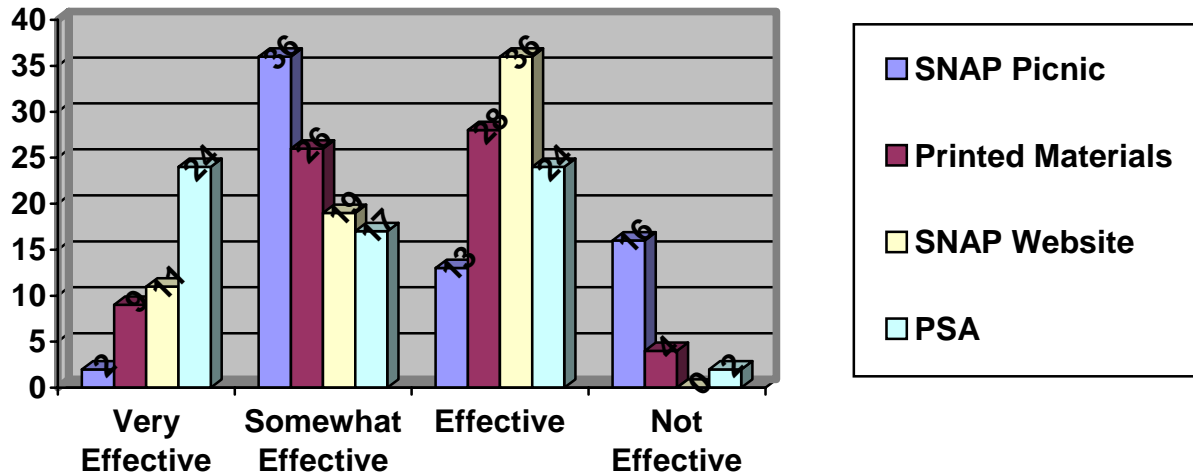
According to participant ratings, SNAP's marketing tools are somewhat effective in recruitment of adoptive parents. The following figure (T6) contains the results from the overall ratings of the effectiveness of SNAP's recruitment of adoptive parents:

T6 – Overall Rating of Effectiveness in Recruitment:

	Very Effective	Somewhat Effective	Effective	Not Effective
SNAP Picnic	2 or 3%	36 or 53.7%	13 or 19.4%	16 or 23.9%
Printed Materials	9 or 13.4%	26 or 38.8%	28 or 41.8%	4 or 6%
SNAP Website	11 or 16.7%	19 or 28.8%	36 or 54.5%	0 or 0%
PSA	24 or 35.8%	17 or 25.4%	24 or 35.8%	2 or 3%

The survey respondents rate the SNAP Website as the most effective tool utilized to recruit adoptive parents followed by Printed Materials and the SNAP Picnic as the most ineffective in recruitment. No one rated the SNAP Website as not effective. The following figure (T7) shows the results from the survey question which asked the respondents to rate the individual effectiveness in recruiting of each marketing tool:

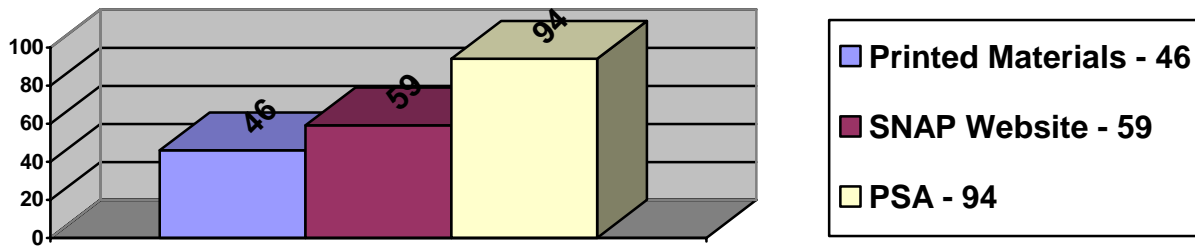
T7 – Individual Rating of Effectiveness in Recruiting:



Eastern Kentucky University Training Resource Center collects data and provides reports to the Cabinet for Health and Family Services regarding the total adoption inquires through the SNAP program. EKU does not keep data regarding inquires as a result of the SNAP Picnic.

According to collected data, the SNAP Website (internet) is the most effective in triggering inquiries regarding adoption. The following data (T8) is a collective calculation of inquiries made to SNAP and the marketing tools which initiated that inquiry:

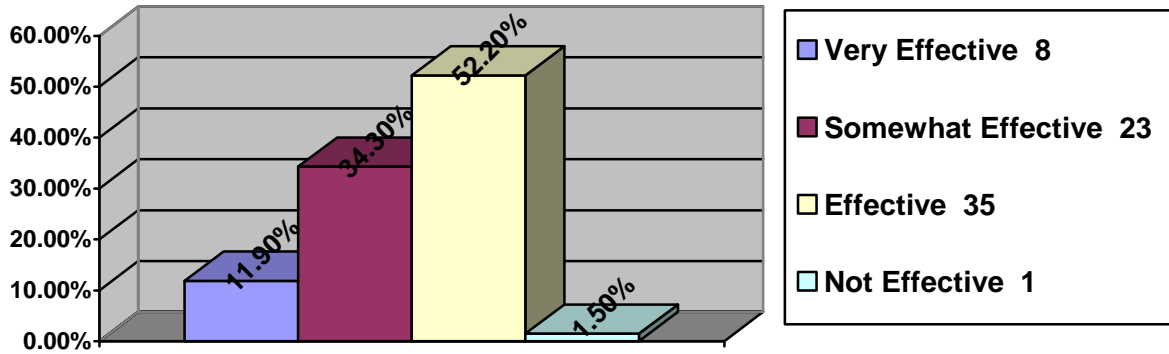
T8 – ECU Data Report Regarding SNAP Inquiries:



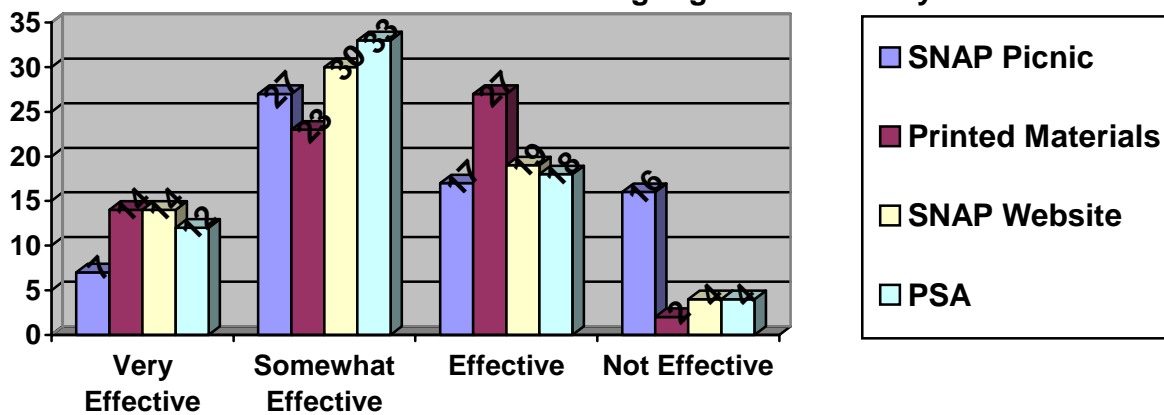
ECU's report titles printed materials as newspaper inquiries and the SNAP Website as internet inquiries (See Appendix B). The data collected through ECU is reported in a 17 month time period from 07/01/2003 to 12/31/2004. ECU reports a total of 717 inquiries to SNAP during this time period. Printed materials total 6.4% (46) of inquiries, 8.2% (59) of inquiries were a result of the website while 13.1% (94) of inquiries were an outcome of PSAs (ECU 2005).

Respondents (52.2%) report that they believe that SNAP is effective in protecting the rights and privacy of those children who are waiting for adoption through the program. Only 1 (1.5%) individual believed that SNAP was not effective at all.

The following figure (T9) represents the ratings of the overall effectiveness of marketing tools utilized by SNAP in protecting the rights and privacy of those children who are awaiting adoption through the program:

T9 – Overall Effectiveness in Protecting Rights and Privacy:

Survey results indicate that Printed Materials are the most effective marketing tool utilized through SNAP which protects the rights and privacy of children in the program waiting for adoption and the SNAP picnic is the most ineffective marketing tool utilized in protecting rights and privacy. The following figure (T10) rates each marketing tool individually in protecting the rights and privacy of those children waiting through the SNAP program for adoption:

T10 – Individual Effectiveness in Protecting Rights and Privacy:

	Very Effective	Somewhat Effective	Effective	Not Effective
SNAP Picnic	7 or 10.4%	27 or 40.3%	17 or 25.4%	16 or 23.9%
Printed Materials	14 or 21.2%	23 or 34.8%	27 or 40.9%	2 or 3%
SNAP Website	14 or 20.9%	30 or 44.8%	19 or 28.4%	4 or 6%
PSA	12 or 17.9%	33 or 49.3%	18 or 26.9%	4 or 6%

Discussion:

The purpose of this research was to discover the most effective marketing tool utilized by the SNAP program and to analyze the effectiveness of those marketing tools in protecting the rights and privacy of children waiting to be adopted. In Fayette County alone there are 183 children waiting for a permanent home, and a total of 1883 statewide. These numbers do not include children in foster care who are awaiting TPR, or those who continue to flood the system daily. Each child, in order to have the most promising future possible, must achieve permanency.

Social workers and other professionals have a duty to provide the best service to these children, including finding them adoptive homes. While having the most effective marketing tools in recruitment is essential to positive outcomes, it must not be at the expense of the best interest of the children in terms of privacy rights. According to the Social Work Code of Ethics, social workers are to protect the confidentiality of clientele (adoptable children). Confidentiality is to only be broken if permission by the guardian (Cabinet for Health and Family Services) is granted (1.07 a) and only for compelling professional reasons (1.07 b) (NASW 1996).

Each marketing tool analyzed targets a different population. I must admit that analyzing the SNAP Picnic was an unneeded effort. The SNAP Picnic is not a recruiting tool. The population that attends the picnics have already been recruited and approved to adopt; therefore, the picnic is not a marketing tool. It should not have been included in the research. The printed materials such as the Herald Leader have shown through actual recorded data by ECU to be the least effective tool used by SNAP. It is also, in my opinion, the marketing tool that most violates the confidentiality of the clientele. The printed materials are distributed throughout the community to the general public which includes neighbors, peers and those who

have shown no interest in adoption. I suspect the printed data did not receive negative ratings from the respondents, in part, due to a recent change in format. The website on the other hand, according to survey results, has rated well in recruitment and protection. Actual ECU data also reveals that it is effective. The population exposed to the website is in general those persons who have an interest in adoption and would benefit from being exposed to the information shared about the children. The PSAs rated highest among the respondents. They have also proven to be the most effective tool, according to data collected through ECU, both in terms of recruitment and protection.

Each respondent was given the opportunity to add additional comments to the survey regarding the marketing tools. Majority of the comments submitted were not positive in nature. Many spoke of the lack of funding appropriated to SNAP to fulfill its mission, while others spoke of inadequate responses by SNAP to inquiries from adoption workers or prospective adoptive parents. Respondents also stated that they felt like the children were being marketed like a clothing line and that the marketing tools violate confidentiality. Numerous respondents state that the best marketing tool for recruitment is other foster parents. There were some positive comments regarding SNAP such as that they are effective in finding homes for hard to place children nation wide. One respondent stated that she loved the idea that we present children during a UK game in front of thousands of on lookers and millions of television viewers.

Implications for practice:

Implications of this research would include the ability to improve marketing tools utilized to recruit adoptive parents, and therefore improve the possibility of adoptions. The research could also be looked at to analyze the effect of the

individual marketing tool on the child. Children in foster care are already stigmatized and hurt. Plastering their stories and pictures on local television stations and newspapers can only bring more shame and ridicule. Therefore, it is of the utmost importance to utilize the most effective marketing tool while also considering the best interest of the child and protecting the rights and privacy of that child.

Limitations of the study:

The most prevalent limitation to this research is the lack of validity of the research instrument. The instrument was created and tested for validity by the principle investigator. Sufficient time and resources to adequately test validity was not available. I also believe that the wording of the survey should have been more clearly defined.

Implications for future research:

More research in this area is needed. Surveys targeted toward the general public or current adoptive parents could give a more accurate perception of the effectiveness and protection aspect of marketing tools. Currently, no one is collecting data regarding the permanency of adoptions so as to analyze whether or not quality parents are in fact being recruited. Also research as to whether or not the motivation for adoption is based on the sympathy alone or higher values is needed. Such information would be helpful in building a profile of recruits most likely to achieve permanency.

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